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Mexico City Depicted as a Soviet Sp

The following article is based on reporting by Robert Lindsey and Joel Brinkley and was written by Mr. Brinkley.

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MEXICO CITY, June 21 — American officials say the Soviet Embassy here is increasingly being used to mount espionage operations against the United States and that it has become a major conduit for the illegal diversion of advanced technology to the Communist world.

Soviet intelligence officers "in essence have a safe haven here," John Gavin, the United States Ambassador to Mexico, said this week.

A senior Mexican Government official acknowledged that there were espionage operations in Mexico City, but he defended Mexico's policy of permitting one of the largest overseas contingents of the Soviet intelligence and internal security agency, the K.G.B., to operate here with virtual impunity.

Mexico 'an Open Country'

Mexico, he said, is "an open country" and any country is allowed to have as many diplomats stationed in Mexico City as it chooses.

New attention has been focused on Mexico City as a result of the arrest of John A. Walker Jr., who is accused of running an extensive spy ring for the Soviet Union.

Agents searching Mr. Walker's home in Norfolk, Va., found receipts from a trip he apparently made to Mexico in 1975, and a senior American official said the Central Intelligence Agency and the Federal Bureau of Investigation were trying to determine what role the Soviet Embassy might have played in Mr. Walker's activities.

So far, the official said, agents have found nothing conclusive. But they know that numerous Americans accused of spying for the Russians have acknowledged using the Soviet Embassy here to meet their Soviet contacts.

Diplomats at the Soviet Embassy

here declined to be interviewed for this article.

Mexican Government officials declined to offer official comment on questions concerning the Soviet presence here, although others were willing to discuss the matter if their names were not used.

United States counterintelligence specialists estimate that at least 150

K.G.B. officers are working out of the embassy under cover as diplomats, clerks, chauffeurs, journalists and in other jobs.

Agents Technically Trained

Increasingly, these specialists say, the K.G.B. officers assigned to Mexico City have technical training so they can manage Soviet efforts to steal American military and industrial secrets, using not only American agents but also what Mr. Gavin called "dummy companies" set up in Mexico to buy advanced American technology and then conceal its ultimate destination: the Soviet Union or other Soviet bloc nations.

As the United States begins trying to improve its counterespionage capabilities in reaction to the Walker family spy case, many American officials say they can not fully contain the problem as long as the Soviet Union maintains a large, unrestricted espionage operation in Mexico City, less than 700 miles from the United States.

American and Mexican officials say the Mexican Government allows Soviet agents to work here virtually without restraint as long as their target is the United States, not Mexico.

Soviet secret agents have been active in Mexico for much of this century. In 1940 Soviet assassins murdered Leon Trotsky, who had taken asylum in Mexico City three years earlier.

Today the Soviet Embassy, an imposing, walled complex in the heart of the city, is watched closely by the Central Intelligence Agency and, to some extent, by the Federal Security Directorate, Mexico's secret police.

Although the C.I.A. maintains a large station here, a senior American official said the C.I.A. officers cannot effectively monitor Soviet activities because they are far outnumbered by agents of the K.G.B. and other Eastern bloc nations that maintain embassies here, including Cuba, East Germany, Bulgaria, Hungary, Rumania, Poland and Czechoslovakia. Intelligence officers from those countries often work in concert with the K.G.B.

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not rely entirely on cooperation from the Mexican authorities. After a recent scandal involving allegations of bribery and drug dealing in the Federal Security Directorate, some senior American officials are worried that the directorate has been penetrated by the K.G.B. A senior Mexican official called that charge "preposterous."

Mexico has fewer than 50 people stationed at its embassy in Moscow. But the Soviet Embassy here, with more than 300 people, is one of the largest Soviet diplomatic missions in the world, even though Moscow has few official dealings with Mexico.

Less than 1 percent of Mexican exports are sold to the Soviet Union, and all the Soviet tourists who visit Mexico in a year "would fit in this room," Mr. Gavin said in an interview in his office.

A senior official of the Mexican Interior Ministry, asked why he thought so many Russians were stationed here, answered simply, "Our neighbor."

Russians Trained in English

Most Soviet officials sent here arrive with more training in English than Spanish, and as they serve here, "their English improves while their Spanish does not," said David A. Phillips, a former C.I.A. officer who was stationed here and later served as head of the agency's Latin America division.

The Soviet officers "aren't interested at all in Mexico; they're interested in the U.S.," said Melvin Beck, another former C.I.A. officer who spent five years working undercover in Mexico City.

A senior Mexican Government official said that most if not all of the 10 or so Soviet journalists working here are K.G.B. agents, and Ambassador Gavin agreed. The Mexican official said the Soviet journalists never attended press conferences or called the Government for information.

A few years ago the Soviet Government asked permission to build several new consulates along the Mexico-United States border, a request the Mexican Government denied after the United States "expressed the view that it wouldn't be helpful to us," a senior American State Department official said.

The Mexicans did allow Moscow to build a consulate in Veracruz, a major port on Mexico's Gulf Coast. And now, American officials here say, the United

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